



## Social Exclusion and Linguistic Minority of Attappady – A Qualitative Study

### KEYWORDS

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Educational backwardness is identified as one of the causes of exclusion. The Constitution recognizes education as a fundamental right of all Indian citizens under Article 21A, still disparities continue among various disadvantaged groups, especially tribes. Tribes exhibit lowest literacy rates of all other due to exclusion. Studies reveal that speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) occur in children due to exclusion and backwardness. The deprivation experienced by tribal children results in limited language skills. The learners with SLCN are found to have problems with processing speech sounds and using language in social contexts. Limited language skills are a risk factor for mental health difficulties and problem behaviour. Children with SLCN experience higher levels of loneliness than their peers. Many factors contribute to the link between social exclusion and communication skills including the stresses families face. When the stress makes it harder for parents to be responsive to children and engage with them, language development gets affected. Attending a good pre-school is an important factor in developing language skills and preventing social exclusion. Any intervention that helps children develop communication skills is likely to increase social inclusion. Developing communication skills in children at risk of social exclusion are valued and found to be effective.

### 1.3 NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study began with the problem of educational backwardness of Palakkad district in the state of Kerala. The district wise analysis of Kerala's literacy rate (2001 census) showed that Palakkad district has the lowest literacy in the state with 84.31 percent. The fact was acknowledged by the SSLC examination results of the past five years, where the pass percentage of district had been hovering around 85percent. The drop-out rate of ST students at high school level was found to be higher in the district. The lack of proficiency in English language was identified as a major obstacle to the education of Tribal learners.

The lack of proficiency in English language is identified as a major obstacle to education of Tribal learners. The inappropriate syllabus and teaching method of English develops a negative attitude in learners towards learning. Though the Government can provide grants and scholarships for the betterment of learners, the responsibility of educational development are ultimately in the hands of experts and teachers.

English is a compulsory subject in the Kerala school course with six periods allotted per week from grade 4. The same also happened to be a subject contributing to failures in SSLC Examination. The failure considerably reduced in recent years – not through increase in competence, but incredibly liberal evaluation. Part of the difficulty can be at-

tributed to peculiar irregularities and difficulties inherent in target language itself. Heavy contrast between mother-tongue and English, do not help the learners to build linguistic bridges in inter-language phenomenon. The tribal learners who come from economically disadvantaged background have to undergo difficulties due to transitional adjustment between home and school environment. Though learners are geographically present in school, they are not intellectually and emotionally involved in school work. Working in lower classes with three languages namely English, Malayalam and Hindi in spite of a tribal dialect, results in acute multiple-inter language problems.

### 1.3.1 OVERVIEW OF ATTAPPADY

The study is carried out in Attappady, the most educationally backward tribal pocket of Palakkad District. Attappady is an extension mountain valley of seven hundred and thirty one in area square.km, lying at the Western Ghat ranges. It is located in the mid-eastern part of Kerala on the north-east of Palakkad district, adjoining Coimbatore and Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. The population of Attappady consists of tribesfolk and non-tribesfolk. Attappady got its name from *atta*, the blood leach and *pad*, the habitation. The three major tribal communities of the region, namely, Irulas, Mudugas and Kurumbas, belong to the broad group of Dravidians. Though Tribesfolk constitute only 1.1 percent of the population of Kerala state, 27 percent of population in Attappady is tribes. (2011 census). The people live in an egalitarian community. The tribal settlements in Attappady are known as *Ooru* (hamlet). Each *Ooru* contains, on an average of 50 houses, densely constructed in rows and protected by a ministry consisting a head, known as *Ooru Moopan*. The economy is traditional in nature, depending mainly on land and forest. In spite of several developmental programmes introduced to improve the livelihood strategies, the plight of tribesfolk continue to be steeped in the morass of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty.

### 1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To investigate the educational backwardness of tribal children with reference to English language
- To understand the English language teaching and learning situation prevailing in Attappady

### 1.6 METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for the collection of data. The pilot study was conducted to gather preliminary data by using qualitative methods. A small-scale study was conducted among the tribal settlement at Anakkal, a rural-urban region situated nearby South Malampuzha in Palakkad district. The tribal children had to face a lot of difficulties in education during the early years. They had to travel a long distance by boat and bus to reach the schools and colleges, situated in town.

With the advent of new routes and transportation facilities, the access to education has become easier and available.

### 1.3.2 ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING SITUATION IN ATTAPPADY

In Attappady, the government schools are situated far away from tribal hamlets. Hence as an initiative, Multi Grade Learning Centers (MGLC's) are introduced in hamlets for making the primary education accessible for tribal children. It was established under the supervision of SSA (SarvaShikshaAbhiyan) of Central Government with a sub-unit of Block Resource Center (BRC). In MGLC's, a single volunteer teacher teaches all the subjects. The first to fourth grade learners are accommodated and trained together in one classroom. Even though children are getting enrolled in schools, only a very less percentage of them continue their education. The increase in the number of drop outs is one of the major causes of educational backwardness.

### MAJOR OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

According to many child psychologists, children reach an important developmental stage at the age of ten (Lambert, & Klineberg, 1967). Studies show the direct correlation between amount of time devoted to language study and the language proficiency, students attain. The children who begin English language learning in elementary school and continue for a number of years have better chance of attaining a high level of proficiency than students whose language instruction begins in the post elementary school years. While educationalists and language experts all over the world insist the importance of effective language instruction from the grass level, English is trained merely as one among the many subjects in MGLC's. Though students are retained in centers, they are not properly trained. Though MGLC can be appreciated as an expansion of the Indian educational system, the concern of quality of education still remains as a question to be addressed. From the study it was derived that, English language teaching and learning situation of MGLCs were not favourable for tribal children in the pedagogy of language acquisition. After acquiring the basic education from Multi Grade Learning Center, the learners were shifted to Government schools. The problem became severe, when they were trained along with non-tribal learners using the same curriculum and syllabus.

The revised curriculum and syllabus is based on the newly introduced Constructivist pedagogy of language learning. It suggests that language learning is similar to the process of mother tongue acquisition. Noam Chomsky in his 'Criticism of Behaviorism' in 1957 stated that 'children must have an inborn faculty for language acquisition' In 1998, the Second Language Acquisition Programme (SLAP) was initiated by in Kerala. The theoretical origin of SLAP is derived from the Cognitive Theory of Language Acquisition based on Chomskyan School of Linguistics. According to the theory, a child is genetically endowed with the language system, known as Universal Grammar. Language acquisition is the unfolding of inner system. It is a non-conscious and non-voluntary process.

The current approach advocated in the curriculum is based on Chomsky's concept of innate language system. According to it, the environmental factors contribute to the process of language learning. The natural atmosphere for learning has to be made inside the classroom with less cause of fear and anxiety among learners. It works on the principle on 'Learning without Burden'. The concept sug-

gests that learning has to happen without force or compulsion as a natural process.

The learning is considered as a cognitive process that can be facilitated by teacher and developed by peer interaction. It claims that a language system can be acquired through recurrence and not by repetition. The system has no concept of 'failure'. The errors are considered as an essential aspect of learning and therefore risk taking is encouraged. The role of teaching materials is minimal. The text book is flexible and designed in such a way that it can be used in variety of ways and for variety of purposes. The language learning is extended to the range of application and experience from the set of rules and practice. The focus is given to creativity and thinking skills with due importance to LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) skills.

The possibilities of new teaching pedagogy and syllabus seem to have helped the above average pupils to work on their own and attain achievement, where as it is not effective to favour the learning needs of backward students. The introduction of uncontrolled vocabulary and structures in an unsystematic method of teaching leaves the weaker ones in a state of confusion and disorder. In notebooks, learners write medley of words that do not even communicate. Ensuring the achievement of lofty objectives is difficult in a curriculum where learners themselves constructing the learning components with proper guidance from teacher. The evidence suggests that students of high school do not even have any command of structures which a learner of 5<sup>th</sup> grade should have obtained. It is found that problem cannot be treated by normal pattern of teaching and it requires special approaches.

The tribes live in a community where they have a mother tongue of their own, apart from the regional language of the state. The mother tongue of tribes is known as 'adhivasi basha' and it has no script. The children of non-tribal parents who are familiar to scripts and texts from their very young age through their family and culture have greater possibilities of acquiring a new language. The tribal learners who are less exposed to scripts and readings find it difficult. The problem becomes crucial when they enters into the primary education, where initial training is given on words and sentences through contexts rather than teaching through the set of sounds and symbols.

English is the language with more number of sounds than its symbols. Hence each symbol is used to denote more than one sound. The inability to read the texts is identified as a serious problem of tribal learners. The learners of 8<sup>th</sup> grade are not able to identify the alphabets and perceive the texts. The lack of training in 'phonemic awareness' and 'phonics' methods in reading are identified as the root cause of learning deficiency. From the findings of pilot study, it was found that English is the toughest subject for tribal learners. The learners had a fear and negative attitude towards English language. The unhealthy classroom climate and lack of motivation prevented the students from acquiring English language skills.

Even though language plays a crucial role in child's development, the environment at home and hostels cause language deprivation in learners. The constructivist pedagogy is used to teach English language in classrooms. The pedagogy emphasized the learning through construction of knowledge. According to curriculum designers, students acquire language from surroundings by situational ap-

proach. On the contrary, students from backward families never had any facilities in their environment for acquisition of language and communicating English.

They have poor reading skills without explicit instruction. The low beginning reading achievement is identified as cause of language delay. The problem compounds itself as students find themselves increasingly behind their non-tribal peers in reading achievement. It was found that a remedial reading intervention is required to accelerate the learning of tribal students

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